

RENEWAL WORKS!
THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF LENT
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The Kingdom of Heaven . . . What's it like?

We tend to talk about pearly gates and streets of gold,
or, my favorite image, a V-E-R-Y long table full of great food and feasting people.
But what does Jesus say?

The Kingdom of Heaven is like some very ordinary, everyday things:

A tiny mustard seed
Yeast in a bushel – that's 60 POUNDS – of wheat flour.
A treasure in a field.
A merchant on a search.
A fishing net in a boat.

The first thing that struck me about this list is the diversity of places:
we have farms and kitchens, fields and markets, and a deep lake.

The second is the diversity of people:

A farmer, a woman, an explorer, a business person, a fishing crew.

The third is the abundance: a large tree from a tiny seed,
a bushel of flour – Fun fact: that makes ~100 loaves of whole-wheat bread –
a valuable treasure in a field – living in Tampa, I thought of pirate booty!
and a single pearl so precious it's worth all a person's assets,
Another fun fact: the Greek word for "pearl" is "μαργαρίτης" (margaritas)
There is nothing stingy or sour about any of these images!
Well, except for the kind of margarita you drink.

And finally, what struck me is that there was a certain level of discernment used
by the people in the stories: Where is a good place to plant a mustard seed?

How much yeast do I need for all that flour?

In a big world, where do I look for buried treasure?

How do I know a pearl is very precious – worth ALL my assets?

And, which fish are worth keeping and which to pitch?

I guess it depends whether you were going to eat them or put them in an aquarium.

Frankly, I don't know the answer to a single one of those questions.

I don't have to, because these stories are not about humans,
they are about God, what God is already doing in this world:

God's Kingdom, God's Reign, God's presence, God's action and will
are ALREADY being done on earth as it is in heaven.

The prophets of old proclaimed God's plan,

the teachings, actions, life, death and resurrection of Jesus put skin on it:

and our very own Book of Common Prayer concisely states it:

the plan of God is to heal the nations and to give us life in all its fullness,
all its abundance. (BCP pp. 98 and 851)

In fact, whether we like it or not, God's plan is going to work;

there's nothing any puny human can do to stop it,

and nothing any puny human can do to make it happen faster;

This has to be true, or we're more powerful than God.

Today's Collect and Scripture readings are at the end of the sermon text.

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These parables all imply that what God is doing to establish the Kingdom is hidden to humans, but it's not so much that the plan itself is hidden;

as it is that humanity chooses neither to see nor seek the Kingdom of Heaven.

Instead of seeking the Kingdom of Heaven, we seek the Kingdom of Sin.

Our presiding bishop, Michael Curry, said the best synonym for sin is selfishness.

This is exactly what Paul was saying to the Galatians 2,000 years ago.

He told them that adhering to the requirements of Mosaic law is not necessary, that, in Christ, they are free from that, because Christ has fulfilled the law.

But Paul also knew what the Galatians would immediately think:

"Well, if Christ has fulfilled the law, then there are no rules; I can do what I want."

So, Paul's challenge to them is: what do you actually WANT, then?

If what you WANT, the secret desire hidden down in your heart, is to serve yourself, no matter the cost to God's creation, to your neighbor, or even to your own body, you have the freedom to do that, but what a miserable life you'll have in the Kingdom of Sin.

Indeed, the most enigmatic gift our God gave to humanity is the gift of free will, to choose which Kingdom we can give our lives to.

Without free will, we do not have the capacity to know good and evil, and are not ultimately responsible for our choices.

With free will, however we can serve whichever kingdom we want the most, and we are responsible for the consequences of our choice.

Which one DO we want the most?

Now, as then, if life in the Spirit, in the Kingdom of Heaven, brings love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, then a life set against the Spirit, life in the Kingdom of Sin, brings apathy, craving, stress, frustration, intolerance, cruelty, mistrust, violence, and restlessness.

What kind of earth do those fruits result in,

both for ourselves during our own lifetimes, and for those who come after us?

To indulge in selfish desires is to choose a scorched, depleted earth,

marketplaces where systemic oppression is acceptable for "efficiency," and unceasing tribal warfare escalating to nations eliminating other nations.

I think I'm on firm ground saying that we don't need to change a thing about our politics, our judicial system, our economics, or what we so innocuously label as entertainment to serve the Kingdom of Sin

Our gift of free will lets us choose this Kingdom of Sin, of selfishness.

One day, when humanity is wailing and grinding its teeth

cursing the very hot mess we've created for ourselves,

I can imagine the angels saying to us, "But, it must be what you wanted, or else why would you have acted like that?"

Yes, God will, in God's good time, heal all creation with or without our cooperation, just as yeast works in dough in the yeast's good time, not the baker's.

Meanwhile, humanity will reap what we sow, we will find what we seek now.

So, as Paul tells the Galatians, if we want a life that bears the fruit of the Spirit, we need to change, deep down inside,

what it is we really WANT for ourselves and our children.

And that is what Renewal is all about.

If what we seek is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, then we'll find it.

When we pray for a clean heart and a right spirit, we are asking God to write on our hearts, as Jeremiah proclaimed God would do; to live by the Spirit and follow the Spirit like the explorer, like the pearl merchant; to fill our lives with the kind of things that result in the good fruits, like the farmer, the baker, and the fishing crew did.

Jesus said that legal experts being trained as disciples for the Kingdom of Heaven bring both old and new things out of their treasure chests.

Clearly, some things that had been treasures for them before the training got left behind after the training. Not everything is worth keeping forever. The best part of all this training for Renewal, though, is that it actually works.

Renewal works, not because God will become more able to be God, but because we actually begin to want Jesus' promise to us to be true:

Jesus promises to give us life in all its fullness,

a fullness that comes only from loving others and ourselves the same way God loves us.

When does that renewal have to start? is there a deadline?

Good news: It's never too late!

None of us is left out, no matter how grimy and wishy-washy our hearts are.

As Anne of Green Gables said, every day is a new day with no mistakes in it yet.

Any day is a great day to pray for the clean heart and right spirit that lets us live by the Spirit that makes us steadfast in the storms of life.

Any day is a great day to start loving God, our neighbor, and ourselves.

Any day is a great day to plant, to bake, to search, to fish and to bring out our treasures, old and new.

Today is the best day, though, because it's the only one we know we have.

Today we are free to live by the spirit, if we want to.

A quick story about how we choose to use our gift of free will:¹

Some ducks lived in a country consisting only of ducks.

They had duck houses, duck jobs, duck families, and even duck churches.

Every Sunday the ducks would waddle to church, waddle down the aisle, and squat in the pews.

The duck pastor would read from the duck bible, and then every week he would preach: "Ducks! You have wings; with wings you can fly like eagles.

You can soar into the skies if you want to! Ducks! You have wings!

With wings there is nowhere you cannot go!

Fly! Ducks, fly! Be who you were created to be!"

Each week, the ducks responded to the pastor's sermon with a hearty "QUACK!" (AMEN!)

But when church was over, they waddled back home.

Will we waddle in the Kingdom of Sin, or fly in the Kingdom of Heaven?

Today, what is it, deep down, that we actually want?

COLLECT OF THE DAY

Holy God, through your Son you have called us to live faithfully and act courageously. Keep us steadfast in your covenant of grace, and teach us the wisdom that comes only through Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

¹ This parable is often attributed to Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, but no primary sources by Kierkegaard have been located to authenticate the parable is his.

JEREMIAH 31:24–25,31–34

Those who live in Judah and its towns will dwell together with farmers and shepherds. I will strengthen the weary and renew those who are weak.

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. It won't be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant with me even though I was their husband, declares the Lord. No, this is the covenant that I will make with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my Instructions within them and engrave them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people. They will no longer need to teach each other to say, "Know the Lord!" because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord; for I will forgive their wrongdoing and never again remember their sins.

PSALM 32:1-9

Happy are they whose transgressions are forgiven, and whose sin is put away!

Happy are they to whom the LORD imputes no guilt, and in whose spirit there is no guile!

While I held my tongue, my bones withered away, because of my groaning all day long.

For your hand was heavy upon me day and night; my moisture was dried up as in the heat of summer.

Then I acknowledged my sin to you, and did not conceal my guilt.

I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the Lord." Then you forgave me the guilt of my sin.

Therefore all the faithful will make their prayers to you in time of trouble;

when the great waters overflow, they shall not reach them.

You are my hiding-place; you preserve me from trouble; you surround me with shouts of deliverance.

"I will instruct you and teach you in the way that you should go; I will guide you with my eye.

GALATIANS 5:13–14,16–17,22–25

You were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only don't let this freedom be an opportunity to indulge your selfish impulses, but serve each other through love. All the Law has been fulfilled in a single statement: Love your neighbor as yourself.

I say be guided by the Spirit and you won't carry out your selfish desires. A person's selfish desires are set against the Spirit, and the Spirit is set against one's selfish desires. They are opposed to each other, so you shouldn't do whatever you want to do.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against things like this. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the self with its passions and its desires.

If we live by the Spirit, let's follow the Spirit..

MATTHEW 13:31–33,44–52

Jesus told another parable to them: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and planted in his field. It's the smallest of all seeds. But when it's grown, it's the largest of all vegetable plants. It becomes a tree so that the birds in the sky come and nest in its branches."

He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast, which a woman took and hid in a bushel of wheat flour until the yeast had worked its way through all the dough."

"The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure that somebody hid in a field, which someone else found and covered up. Full of joy, the finder sold everything and bought that field.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. When he found one very precious pearl, he went and sold all that he owned and bought it.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that people threw into the lake and gathered all kinds of fish. When it was full, they pulled it to the shore, where they sat down and put the good fish together into containers. But the bad fish they threw away. That's the way it will be at the end of the present age. The angels will go out and separate the evil people from the righteous people, and will throw the evil ones into a burning furnace. People there will be weeping and grinding their teeth.

"Have you understood all these things?" Jesus asked.

They said to him, "Yes."

Then he said to them, "Therefore, every legal expert who has been trained as a disciple for the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings old and new things out of their treasure chest."

SERMON HYMN: *New Every Morning*